

The following article is the third in a series on California rarities edited by Morlan and Roberson. It is based on materials submitted to the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC). The description and circumstances were edited from the accounts of the observers and have been reviewed by them. Roberson prepared the distributional summary and Morlan prepared the identification summary. In this way we hope that much important information accumulated in CBRC files will become widely available.



Common Black-Hawk

Sketch by Tim Manolis

FIRST RECORD OF THE COMMON BLACK-HAWK FOR CALIFORNIA

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On 13 April 1985, Daniels and the Hayses found a Common Black-Hawk *Buteogallus anthracinus* at Thousand Palms Nature Conservancy Preserve, Riverside County, California, a lush California Fan Palm *Washingtonia filifera* oasis with a creek lined by Fremont Cottonwoods *Populus fremontii*. They first saw the hawk at 0700 flying downstream about 50 yards away. A Common Raven *Corvus corax* whose nest was nearby harassed it. The hawk flew back over the observers (within about 50 feet) and disappeared into the palm trees. At about 0800 they saw it again about a half mile upstream. It flew past them and then circled higher and higher, disappearing toward the north. They observed the bird for a total of about 15 minutes. Efforts to follow it by car were unsuccessful. They, and others, searched for the hawk later that day, but did not find it.

The following description was compiled from those of the three observers:

A buteonine hawk about the size of a Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis* (not directly compared but soaring in the same general area) but differing by its very broad rounded wings and short wide tail. It was perhaps the same length as the adjacent raven but was noticeably bulkier and soared with a flat flight profile.

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The entire plumage was black—dull black to coal black—except for a pale white patch on the underwing at the base of the primaries, a broad bright white median tail band, and a narrow terminal tail band. The white wing patch was not as bright as the tail bands and was limited to the basal portions of the outer 4 or 5 primaries. The tail bands were seen on both the dorsal and ventral surfaces; the median band was perhaps 5 to 7 times wider than the terminal band (noted only by Daniels). The upper tail coverts were particularly scrutinized (to eliminate the possibility of the Great Black-Hawk *B. urubitinga*); they were black.

The cere was bright yellow, noticeable even from a distance, the yellow seeming to extend onto the face. The rest of the heavily hooked large bill was black. The legs and feet, seen well when the bird was overhead, were lemon yellow and extended in flight to the center of the median tail band, emphasizing the tail's shortness. The talons were black. When the bird was directly overhead, no bands or jesses were seen on its legs.

L. Hays described a loud "scree" call.

The record was unanimously accepted by the California Bird Records Committee on the first circulation. Daniels and most CBRC members disputed the described call, suggesting it was given by the nearby Red-tailed Hawk, but L. Hays felt the call was similar to ones he had heard from Common Black-Hawks in Arizona (see below for further discussion of vocalizations). This represents the first record of the Common Black-Hawk for California (Roberson 1986).

DISTRIBUTIONAL SUMMARY

The Common Black-Hawk ranges from northwestern Arizona, southwestern Utah, southern New Mexico, and western Texas (Figure 1) to northern South America, with isolated local populations in the Caribbean. The northernmost populations are migratory (A.O.U. 1983). Birds are present in Arizona from mid-March to early October (Monson and Phillips 1981); there are no authentic winter records (DeSante and Pyle 1986).

At least 150 pairs breed in the United States portion of the hawk's range, of which 80–90% are in Arizona (Schnell 1979, Helen Snyder in litt. to Minnesota Ornithologists' Records Committee). A few pairs nest in the Davis Mountains of western Texas and occasionally along the Rio Grande in southern Texas (Schnell 1979, Texas Ornithological Society 1984). There are a few nesting records from the Virgin River in southwest Utah (Behle et al. 1985). A vagrant was at Chatfield State Recreation Area, Jefferson County, Colorado, 20–21 June 1980 (Gent 1987).

A Common Black-Hawk in heavy postjuvenile molt was hit by a truck on 18 September 1976 at Bemidji, Minnesota. This bird was first considered to be possibly a wild vagrant (Elwell et al. 1978), but it has since been regarded as a probable escape (DeSante and Pyle 1986). The species was offered commercially for sale in the mid-1970s, and the specimen shows asymmetrical molt, fret marks (the result of stress, such as inadequate nutrition) on the juvenile primaries of the left wing, and abnormally heavy wear on the central retrices (Harrison B. Tordoff in litt. to Minnesota Ornithologists' Records Committee). These facts persuaded the Minnesota Records Committee to reject the record (R. Janssen pers. comm.).

In southern Florida between 1972 and 1976 there were at least four black-hawks that were originally published as Common Black-Hawks, possibly of

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Caribbean origin (Abramson 1976). However, these birds did not have the prominent white wing patch of Caribbean birds (Ogden 1975) and are treated as escaped birds, possibly Great Black-Hawks, by the A.O.U. (1983). Wally George (in litt.) observed one of the adults numerous times; that bird had white uppertail coverts and a white tail with a black subterminal band. These characters rule out the Common Black-Hawk and are marks of the Great Black-Hawk. In addition, the tail pattern of the immature bird shown in the published photo (Abramson 1976) suggests the bird may be a second-year Great Black-Hawk (see below for further discussion of plumages). These black-hawks have successfully nested in south Florida (Ogden 1975, W. George in litt.). Details have not been submitted to the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee and neither species is accepted on the state list (Helen Dowling in litt.).

The previous records nearest California are from the Arizona side of the Colorado River, southern Nevada, and northwestern Baja California, Mexico. The Common Black-Hawk was reported along the Colorado River in Arizona at Parker, near Ehrenberg (11 April 1978 and 5 May 1979, the latter published as "possibly *urubitinga*," Monson and Phillips 1981), and in the Bill Williams

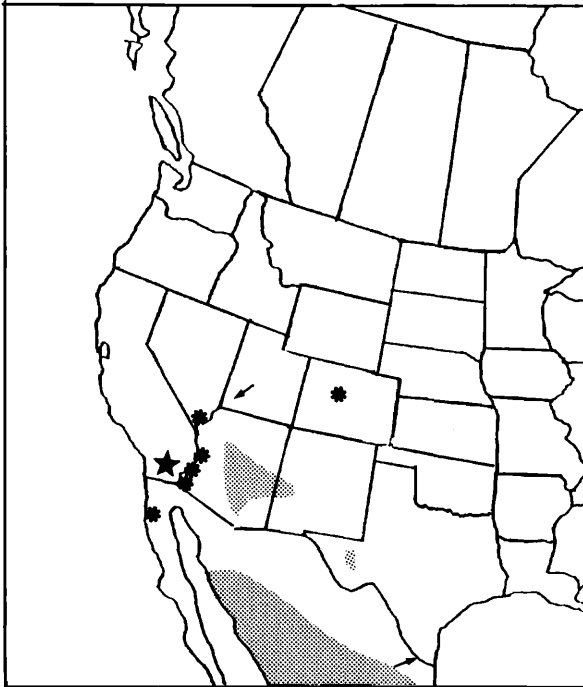


Figure 1. Approximate breeding range of Common Black-Hawk (shaded; U.S. range after Schnell 1979), with extralimital nesting (arrows), and records of vagrants mentioned in text (asterisks), and the California record (star).

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Delta from March to May 1979 and in summer 1981 (Rosenberg et al. 1981). There are at least five records from southern Nevada (Kingery 1980), but the species has not attempted to nest there (DeSante and Pyle 1986, contra A.O.U. 1983). Short and Crossin (1967) reported seeing an adult on 7 April 1967 (not "7 May" as stated by Palmer 1988a) near San Vicente, northwestern Baja California.

Because of the number of records just across the border, a California sighting was expected, and this species was chosen by 4 of 5 experts asked by Jehl (1980) to predict the ten likeliest birds to be added to the California state list. The mid-April date and the desert oasis locale seem appropriate. A Common Black-Hawk reported ten days later in Joshua Tree National Monument (McCaskie 1985) was judged by the CBRC to be inadequately documented (Bevier in prep.).

SUBSPECIES

The A.O.U. (1957) regarded United States birds as part of the subspecies *B. a. anthracinus*. The population from Cuba and the Isle of Pines is a subspecies, *gundlachii*, of the Common Black-Hawk, according to the A.O.U. (1983). *B. a. gundlachii* differs from nominate *anthracinus* by the much larger white patch on its underwing (Bond 1979), its browner overall coloration, and its whitish malar stripe (Brown and Amadon 1968). Because of the size of the wing patch and lack of malar stripe, as well as geographic distribution, we assign the California bird to the *anthracinus* group (A.O.U. 1983), generally regarded as comprising a single subspecies *B. a. anthracinus* (Blake 1977, Brown and Amadon 1968), with which *B. a. utilensis* of islands in the Gulf of Honduras, recognized by Stresemann and Amadon (1979), is synonymized. According to the A.O.U. (1983), populations from Pacific coastal areas of El Salvador southward are a separate species, the Mangrove Black-Hawk *B. subtilis* (discussed further below), but some authors (e.g., Palmer 1988a) still treat these populations as subspecies of *B. anthracinus*.

IDENTIFICATION SUMMARY

In the United States, the Common Black-Hawk is most likely to be confused with the Zone-tailed Hawk *Buteo albonotatus*, although dark morphs of other species may bear some resemblance to it (Clark and Wheeler 1987). The Common Black-Hawk resembles the Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus* in that both birds are black with a white patch at the base of the primaries (faint on the Common Black-Hawk) and have rounded wings and a short tail. Both soar on flat wings, but the Black Vulture flaps its wings quickly, while the Common Black-Hawk flaps its wings slowly. The tails of adult Common Black-Hawks and adult Zone-tailed Hawks both show a broad white band across the center of the tail. The Zone-tailed has one or two additional narrow bands across the base of the tail. These are usually lacking or concealed by tail coverts on the Common Black-Hawk, but narrow white edges on the tail coverts of the Common Black-Hawk may give the illusion of narrow bands. On the Common Black-Hawk the bands are white on both the upper and lower sides of the tail, but on the Zone-tailed the bands on the upper side are gray and

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much less distinct. The Common Black-Hawk appears to have a shorter tail than the Zone-tailed, but on perched birds tail differences may be difficult to see and the clearest differences are on the bill and legs. The bill of the Common Black-Hawk is about 30% larger than that of the Zone-tailed Hawk and has a larger yellow cere connecting to more extensive yellow lores. The Common Black-Hawk's yellow legs are much longer than the Zone-tailed's (Stallcup 1985, Friedmann 1950).

In the tropics, several other species closely resemble the Common Black-Hawk. The Mangrove Black-Hawk replaces the Common Black-Hawk in coastal mangroves along the Pacific coast from El Salvador (possibly southern Mexico; Davis 1972) south to Peru (A.O.U. 1983). The Mangrove Black-Hawk exhibits substantial geographic variation, with three well-marked subspecies differing in the amount of rufous in their secondaries and inner primaries. South American birds (*B. s. subtilis*) have the most rufous and El Salvador/Honduras birds (*B. s. rhizophoræ*) have the least; Costa Rica/Panama birds (*B. s. bangsi*) are intermediate (Blake 1977, Monroe 1968). Otherwise, the Mangrove Black-Hawk is similar to the Common Black-Hawk (which also has faint rufous in the secondaries but not the inner primaries) except for its smaller size and more white in its underwing (Brown and Amadon 1968).

The Great Black-Hawk of Middle and South America is also quite similar to the Common Black-Hawk. It ranges north to northern Mexico, and some previous reports of Common Black-Hawks in Florida and Arizona have been suspected of pertaining to this species. The adult Great Black-Hawk is best distinguished by its uppertail coverts, which are white in all populations. It also has longer legs, which nearly reach the tip of the tail in flight, and its underwings average less white than the Common Black-Hawk's. Middle American populations (*B. u. ridgwayi*) have two or three white bands on the tail, fairly conspicuous white barring on the thighs, and slaty lores with yellow confined to the cere (Ridgely 1976). The South American *B. u. urubitinga* lacks the thigh markings, has yellow lores, and has a single white band across the entire base of the tail connecting to the white uppertail coverts.

The rare Solitary Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus solitarius*, whose range broadly overlaps that of the Great Black-Hawk, is even larger, lacks the white wing patch of the Common Black-Hawk, and has a larger, more projecting head, often with a bushy crest (Hilty and Brown 1986).

All juvenal black-hawks are similar to each other and quite different from immature Zone-tailed Hawks. They have a highly patterned head with a bold dark malar stripe, and many have a pale supercilium that contrasts with a darkish cap. Their underparts are largely buff or whitish with heavy dark streaks and large teardrop-shaped brown spots, especially on the flanks and sides of the breast. Their backs are blackish brown, heavily mottled with white or buff, especially on the upper back and nape. On the juvenal Common Black-Hawk, the tail is whitish, crossed by about 5-8 wavy narrow dark bars. The Great Black-Hawk is similar, but its tail is crossed by 10-14 dark bars (Ridgely 1976, Hilty and Brown 1986). In both species, juvenal plumage is retained through winter and gradually molted during the next spring, summer, and fall (Palmer 1988a). Unlike the Common Black-Hawk, the Great Black-Hawk has a distinctive second-year immature plumage, similar to the juvenal, but

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with only 5 or 6 tail bands. In this plumage, the subterminal blackish band is much wider, constituting about a fifth of the entire tail length, unlike juvenal plumages of both species, in which the subterminal band is only slightly broader than the others (Friedmann 1950). The longer legs of the Great Black-Hawk remain helpful in identification of immatures. Juvenal Solitary Eagles apparently lack prominent tail barring (Friedmann 1950, Hilty and Brown 1986). Juvenal Mangrove Black-Hawks are very similar to juvenal Common Black-Hawks, differing only in their smaller size and possibly in having less streaking on the underparts and more rufous in their secondaries and wing coverts (Friedmann 1950). However, these plumage differences probably vary depending on the subspecies.

Juvenal Broad-winged Hawks *Buteo platypterus* and Gray Hawks *B. nitidus* are smaller and have straighter, more even gray-and-brown rather than wavy black-and-white tail bands. However, the juvenal Broad-winged Hawk varies conspicuously in the width of its proximal tail bands, variation not illustrated in field guides. On such birds, the tail bands are about equal in width and much broader than the narrow wavy bands on the tails of juvenal black-hawks. Forbush (1927) and Oberholser (1974) misinterpreted this variant as a second-year plumage, and Friedmann (1950) suggested that it might be transitional, but Johnson and Peeters (1963) showed that it was merely normal variation in juvenal plumage (cf. also Palmer 1988a,b).

Further study of vocalizations is needed. Hilty and Brown (1986), Ridgely (1976), and Schnell (1979) stated that the calls of Common and Great Black-Hawks are distinctive, but descriptions in other literature are confusing. The Common Black-Hawk typically gives a series of shrill, high-pitched, whistled screams best described as "wee-weeee-we-we-we" or "fle-fle-flee-fle-fle-fle" with the longest syllable higher and louder than the rest (Terrill 1983). These are the high-pitched "spinking" whistled notes described by Ridgely (1976) and Hilty and Brown (1986) and the seven to eight piercing staccato, multi-pitched notes described by Schnell (1979). A harsh prolonged cry "ka-a-a-ah, ka-a-a-ah" (Bent 1937) or "haaaaaah" (Peterson and Chalif 1973), a weak, long, high-pitched whistle (Edwards 1972), and a night-heron-like squawk (Bent 1937) have also been attributed to the Common Black-Hawk, possibly in error (cf. also Schnell 1988). The voice of the Great Black-Hawk is usually described as a high-pitched whistled scream "weeeeeeeur" (Hilty and Brown 1986, Ridgely 1976, Peterson and Chalif 1973) or a rasping extended high-pitched whistle (Edwards 1972). This call is given by both flying and perched birds, but Peterson and Chalif (1973) attribute a "keek-keek-keek" to the aerial display of the Great Black-Hawk, and Davis (1972) describes this as "ka-ka-ka-keeo," with the final "keeo" sometimes given alone as a loud scream.

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